Essay on African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

This essay will explore the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) used in two novels; Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) and Angie Thomas's *The Hate You Give* (2017), and two oral performances; Robert Johnson's blues song "Come On in My Kitchen" (1936) and Malcolm X's speech "The Ballot or the Bullet" (1964). Within the essay, the language, style and structure of the texts will be explored. There will also be an analysis of the cultural and historical factors contained within Walker's novel and Malcolm X's speech, along with analysing how social variation operates in Johnson's song and Thomas's novel. The reading of selected passages and transcripts of the audio highlights some of the typical ways AAVE can be used; like using *be* to show something that happens often, using double negatives for emphasis, consonant-cluster reduction, and copula deletion. Two clear instances of social variation; Starr Carter's code-switching in *The Hate You Give* (Thomas, 2017) and the Southern blues pronunciation, demonstrate the adaptability and regional flavour of AAVE. The essay further explores AAVE through personal letters, modern teen conversations, emotional blues lyrics, and powerful political speech, concluding with the idea that AAVE is a vibrant, structured form of language deeply rooted in African American culture. AAVE is more than a dialect; it functions as an identity marker, a cultural archive, and a site of linguistic innovation shaped by generations of resistance to linguistic hegemony.

AAVE is described as historically characterised as "bad" English or "slang", but research, as covered by Lisa J. Green (*African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*, 2002), shows consistent patterns in syntax, phonology, and word use. For example, habitual *be* marks repeated or ongoing actions ("She be tagging long hind a lady" (Walker, 1983, p. 15), multiple negation can add emphasis ("I don't never git used to it" (Walker, 1982, p. 3). Copula deletion drops the linking verb ("She ugly" (Walker, 1983, p. 10), and consonant-cluster reduction turns "old" into "ol'" (Thomas, 2017, p. 10) or "them" into "'em" (Walker, 1983, p. 20). Vocabulary items like tense/time marker *finna*, which is used for events just about to happen (Rickford and Rickford, 2000) and "tag questions", in which the speaker assumes a positive response, as in "John be listenin', don't he?" or a negative response, as in "John don't be listenin', do he?" (Rickford and Rickford, 2000, p. 127) are also noteworthy. These features can serve practical functions, such as demonstrating attitude, mood, social unity, and social distance, while tying the speakers to a shared history built upon rebellion and community resilience. Additionally, AAVE offers space for identity play and stylistic nuance. Its unique sound patterns and expressive structures not only resist standardisation but allow for crafting of rhythm, emotion, and meaning, especially in oral performances and literary dialogue.

AAVE also functions as a means of establishing solidarity and asserting cultural pride. It offers speakers a way to express resistance to dominant norms and to affirm their connection to a collective past shaped by enslavement, migration, and systemic exclusion. Far from being static, AAVE evolves across generations while preserving many of its core grammatical structures, which are misinterpreted by outsiders as errors rather than intentional forms with social meaning. The continual misunderstanding and stigmatisation of AAVE in educational and professional settings further underscores its political dimension. Thus, the examination of AAVE within literature and performance is not only a linguistic exercise but also an exploration of cultural affirmation and social struggle.

To interpret how AAVE has shaped these four texts, excerpts from the two novels have been selected for a detailed analysis—these are primarily inner thoughts and dialogue. Audio and transcriptions of Robert Johnson's blues track and transcripts of the speech by Malcolm X were studied for speech indicators, prosodic rhythms, and rhetorical devices.

To provide context, secondary sources on segregation, gendered violence, and sharecropping (a system of agriculture that emerged in the Southern United States after the Civil War) in Walker's books, and on the debates between integration and Black Power activism in Malcolm's era (Malcolm X, 1964), were consulted. As an example, two cases of social variation—code-switching in Thomas's *The Hate You Give* (Thomas, 2017) and the regional phonology in Johnson's performance—illustrate how AAVE adapts to fit the speaker's setting and message. These variations show how language conveys information and indexes cultural belonging and intention. They show how speakers move across styles, balancing audience expectation and personal expression in real time. In doing so, they make deliberate choices about identity, alignment, and voice, revealing the layered communicative power of AAVE.

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983) is written as a series of letters from Celie to God, and, later in the text, to her sister Nettie. The choice to write this way results in the reader being forced to inhabit Celie's voice alone, without a neutral narrator. Early in the novel Celie writes "He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them" (Walker, 1983, p. 23). The triple negation of "he don't hardly beat them" intensifies the sense of constant and relentless abuse. The word *cept* used in place of "except" and the dropping of the copula in "He sick" (Walker, 1983, p. 27) reflect Southern AAVE patterns that developed when any formal education was denied to Black sharecroppers under Jim Crow (Labov, 1969). The subject-verb mismatches such as "Think, when she come home us leave here" (Walker, 1983, p. 133) and phonetic spellings "Finally she ast Where it is?" (Walker, 1983, p. 4) ("ast" in place of "ask") place readers in Celie's rural community with its rhythms and tonal hesitations. These stylistic decisions immerse the reader in the linguistic norms of a specific time and place, framing Celie's personal growth within a linguistically authentic environment. As Celie's self-worth grows, her letters increase in length and the sentence structure in these subsequent letters at times resembles Standard American English (SAE), an example of this is "Africans wear a little sometimes, or a lot, according to Nettie" (Walker, 1983, p. 246). This progression is not accidental but mirrors her journey from voicelessness to a reclaimed linguistic and personal identity.

The use of the epistolary form, combined with phonetic spelling and Southern dialect, results in a textured, realistic representation of Black womanhood shaped by hardship and silence. As Celie begins to heal, the evolution of her language mirrors her increasing agency. Rather than being corrected or assimilated into SAE, Celie's voice expands on its own terms, embodying the power of vernacular speech as a form of resistance. Her identity is validated not by abandoning AAVE but by using it to articulate emotion, trauma, and ultimately, joy. This reflects how language choice can be a vehicle for both survival and self-expression.

Angie Thomas's *The Hate You Give* intersperses AAVE within a narrative written largely in SAE. This is used to dramatise Starr Carter's dual identity. A key theme in the novel is Starr's situational code-switching: she consciously suppresses AAVE while at Williamson Prep to avoid stereotypes and societal inequalities. For instance, she deliberately chooses not to use slang or "hood" language at school, instead speaking in SAE to fit in with her white peers. As Starr explains, "Williamson Starr doesn't use slang, if a rapper would say it, she doesn't say it, even if her white friends do. Slang makes them cool, slang makes her 'hood'" (Thomas, 2017, p. 73). This internal conflict reflects both the turmoil within, and the external pressure Starr feels is imposed upon her by society. Within the prep-school setting the narration then shifts to SAE, as an example "I'm not even sure I belong at this party. There are just some places where it's not enough to be me." Thomas's blending of voices captures the intersection of authenticity and

expectation and shows how Black youth navigate linguistic bias in contemporary America.

Here Starr is expressing her struggle with fitting into her two different worlds, the poor, Black neighbourhood she is from and the wealthy, mostly white school she attends. Her strategic use of AAVE and SAE demonstrates how language mediates identity and safety. Code-switching becomes a method of coping with microaggressions and institutional racism, but it also serves as a reminder of the pressure to perform whiteness to be accepted. The novel does not frame AAVE as inferior, but as underappreciated and misunderstood by the dominant culture. Through Starr, Thomas reveals that language is not merely a communication tool—it is a form of self-representation negotiated in every social setting.

Robert Johnson's *Come On in My Kitchen* (1936) recording embodies the Delta-region AAVE in musical form. The song's final line "You better come on in my kitchen 'Cause, it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors" (Johnson, 1936) features consonant-cluster reduction (Wald, 2004). This motif, mapped to guitar embellishments using a slide, provides a characteristic bluesy feel with an intimate, confessional feel. The melodic speech style of Johnson coupled with the unique phonetic qualities of AAVE merge into a performance register that communicates both the sadness and mutual recollection without needing a distinct chorus or audience. Johnson's oral style, steeped in metaphor and musicality, transforms linguistic features into artistic expression, rooted in regional and cultural specificity. The integration of AAVE into the blues genre reflects a long-standing oral tradition that celebrates storytelling and social commentary. The sounds, phrases, and lyrical phrasing speak not only of romantic longing but of collective struggle.

Malcolm X delivered his iconic speech *The Ballot or the Bullet* on two occasions in April 1964: first on April 3 at Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, and then on April 12 at King Solomon Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan. The speech itself alternates between SAE: "This is why I say it's the ballot or the bullet. It's liberty or it's death. It's freedom for everybody or freedom for nobody." (Malcolm X, 1964), and a more regional speech melody: "Oh, I say, you been misled. You been had. You been took." And metaphors like "you got a racial powder keg sitting in your lap, you are in more trouble than if you had an atomic powder keg sitting in your lap." highlighting the intense and volatile racial tensions in America. Comparing the situation to a powder keg, he warns that the racial injustice and oppression faced by African Americans are explosive and could ignite widespread conflict if not addressed. Alternating registers build national credibility while mobilizing grassroots support, leveraging AAVE's oral-performative power to bridge political discourse and lived experience. His style exemplifies how AAVE can be used in rhetorical strategy, combining immediacy with authenticity. The emotive rhythm and direct address found in his AAVE-inflected phrases draw on a long legacy of Black preachers and orators, grounding his political arguments in a cultural form instantly familiar to his audience.

The sustained use of AAVE used by Walker through the form of letter writing contrasts sharply with the mixed SAE/AAVE design found in Thomas's work, yet both emphasize AAVE's structured grammar to depict Black life. Johnson's blues performance and Malcolm X's declamation show AAVE's range, from personal confession, deepened through phonetic detail, to public action powered by rhythmic repetition and call-and-response patterns. Across all four of the works, AAVE's systematic features, for example multiple negation, consonant-cluster reduction, the deletion of copula and habitual *be*, operate as expressive tools. Recognising this speech as a key part of African American expression, rather than seeing it as just a "broken" form of SAE, follows the work of Labov (1969) and Green (2002), who show that it is a fully developed and meaningful

variety of language. These texts together reinforce the need to view AAVE not only as a tool for narrative realism but also as a mode of cultural affirmation and resistance to linguistic assimilation. The power of AAVE lies in its ability to hold memory, emotion, identity, and resistance in every utterance.

Wordcount: 1,974

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